Shades of Suffrage: Race, Politics, and Votes for Women in the South

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I. Introduction

Since the first living moments of our nation, the question of women's role in the American political system has been at the forefront of political debates and discussions. From Belva Ann Lockwood's landmark battle for women being allowed to argue before the Supreme Court in 1879 to Kamala Harris becoming the first woman vice president of the United States in 2021, the nation has witnessed a rich, deep history of progress in the political representation of women. Even during the drafting of the founding principles of the United States, the question of women appeared, notably in Abigail Adams's letter to her husband, John Adams. She wrote just months before the founding of our nation:

> … in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.[1]

Abigail Adam's call upon the Founding Fathers to "remember the ladies" would be echoed by generations of feminists following her. While Adams might not be regarded as a 'feminist' in contemporary understanding, her commitment to greater protection for women and access to educational opportunities reflects a progressive tone in her era.

Equally integral to the nation's journey has been the fight for the rights of Black Americans. Often, these two struggles have intersected and, at times, conflicted with each other. This paper explores the intricate relationship between race and the fight for women's suffrage in the South. It starts by examining two pivotal historical episodes that shaped the trajectory of the women's suffrage movement. The first is Frederick Douglass's decision to withdraw support for women's suffrage in the 1840s to secure voting rights for Black men. The second is the troubling racism evident in advocacy for women's

suffrage by Carrie Chapman Catt, Francis Willard, and other suffragists, many of whom were involved in the suffrage movement in Tennessee. Finally, it concludes that the suffrage movement deliberately chose to position itself independent from and at odds with the pursuit of racial equality, despite any progressive sentiments within the movement regarding racial issues.

II. Douglass's Dilemma

a. "Woman's Rights Man"

As Elizabeth Cady Stanton opened the Seneca Falls Convention in July 1848 in New York, she sought nothing short of full equality for women. To achieve that equality, she urged attendees of the convention to call for suffrage, proclaiming in her opening address, "We now demand our right to vote according to the declaration of government under which we live."[2] However, as the convention opened for debate, many attendees, men and women alike, voiced their concerns over the ninth resolution of Stanton's Declaration of Sentiments, which stated, "Resolved, That it is the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise."[3] They feared such a radical demand for suffrage might detract from other demands of the movement, including greater educational and professional opportunities. The other eleven resolutions focused on less extreme demands and used more nebulous language, as shown in the eighth resolution, which called upon women to "move in the enlarged sphere which her great Creator has assigned her."[4]

Lucretia Mott, a Quaker minister and leading American abolitionist, stood prominently among those expressing reservations. When she first read the ninth resolution, Mott remarked, "Lizzie, thou wilt make the convention ridiculous."[5] Mott's reaction emphasizes the significance of demanding suffrage in the mid-18th Century. Stanton viewed voting rights as the linchpin of the fight for equality and needed assistance in gaining the convention's support for the suffrage resolution. Mott focused her efforts, at least this early in the women's rights movement, on professional and economic equality. In the words of the historian Carol Faulkner, "Stanton viewed women's inequality as a political and legal problem. Mott saw women's subordination as one of many threats to individual liberty wrought by mindless tradition

and savage greed."[6] The differing goals of Stanton and Mott are analogous to those of W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, with Du Bois and Stanton favoring more aggressive demands for civil rights and Washington and Mott opting for a gradual approach to equal rights centered around economic mobility. Nevertheless, Mott, in contrast with Washington, remained politically active, eventually supporting the call for women's suffrage.

Stanton realized she needed dire help if there was any chance of the ninth resolution staying in the list of demands. Enter Frederick Douglass, a long-time ally of the women's rights movement and a friend of Stanton. Douglass lived near the Stantons in Boston during the 1840s and firmly believed in the potential synergy of women's rights and abolitionist movements. Before the convention, he even published a notice for the meeting in his newspaper, *The North Star*. Faced with what seemed like a failure of the ninth resolution, Stanton turned to the abolitionist for help. She would later explain in a speech to suffragists, "I knew Frederick, from personal experience, was just the man for the work."[7] Having been called upon to urge the audience to support Stanton's suffrage resolution, Douglass argued:

> In this denial of the right to participate in government, not merely the degradation of woman and the perpetuation of a great injustice happens, but the maiming and repudiation of one-half of the moral and intellectual power of the government of the world.[8]

Douglass contended that voting rights were the necessary guarantors of all other rights. Failure to demand women's suffrage would be a mistake on the part of the women's rights activists. With Douglass' support, the resolution passed barely and was included in the final draft of the Declaration of Sentiments.[9] The following week, Douglass published a piece in *The North Star* noting the demands made at the convention:

> We hold woman to be justly entitled to all we claim for men … all that distinguishes man as an intelligent and accountable being, is equally true of woman and if that government is only just which governs by the free consent of the governed there can be no reason in the world for denying to woman the exercise of the elective franchise, or a hand in making and administering laws of the land.[10]

He was not shy in declaring his outright support for the equality of women and for equal representation in governmental bodies.

Douglass' support for women's suffrage extended far beyond Seneca Falls. As Elaine Weiss notes, "Douglass would attend every national women's rights convention for the next fifty years and was one of the staunchest friends of the movement."[11] Many suffragists, similarly, supported and worked with Douglass in his fight for abolition and equal rights for all races. Susan B. Anthony, a central figure in the women's suffrage movement, learned organizational skills by working in the Anti-Slavery Society. Women's participation in such societies was important to abolitionism, as they provided funds to the organizations. Indeed, Jay Walker notes that "without the Annual Fairs of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, without the small-town organizations like the Lynn Anti-Slavery Sewing Society and the West Boxford Female Anti-Slavery Society, the struggling Abolitionist Movement would have starved."[12] Douglass recognized the importance of suffragists to the abolitionist movement, and women's rights activists recognized the importance of abolitionists to the suffrage movement. Through the events of 1840, the movements had become intertwined, but their harmony was fragile as both groups became singularly focused on achieving their respective goals, even if it meant disregarding the aims of the other movement.

b. The Compromise of the 15th Amendment

The 15th Amendment and its accompanying compromise threatened to splinter the two movements. Any discussion of the 15th Amendment's compromise over women's suffrage must begin with the 14th Amendment. Section 2 of the 14th Amendment marked the first time a gender designation had appeared in the U.S. Constitution; it used the phrase 'male citizen' when discussing representation in Congress and penalties for voter suppression. Not once before had there been a gender qualifier on what constituted a participating member of America's democracy. Suffragists were outraged. Stanton wrote in a letter to House Representative Gerrit Smith, "If that word male be inserted it will take us at least a century to get it out."[13] Stanton turned out to be half-right—it would take another fifty years after the passage of the 15th Amendment for women to be allowed to vote in federal elections.

As Lucretia Mott feared at the Seneca Falls Convention, women's suffrage was not by any measure popular in the 19th Century and not any more so twenty years later at the end of a war fought over slavery. Douglass recognized this reality; the post-war period was his best shot at enfranchising Black men, but not necessarily women. He had long been aware of the challenges in convincing Southern states to ratify an amendment to enfranchise Black men. During the Reconstruction Era, Congress, led by the Radical Republicans, was willing to admit states back to the North on the condition they ratified such an amendment, providing Douglass with a mechanism for achieving suffrage for Black men. Douglass, however, feared that trying to force the nation to swallow two huge reforms at once might backfire. Douglass's decision-making calculus echoed a quote attributed to President Lyndon B. Johnson: "Congress is like a whiskey drinker. You can put an awful lot of whiskey into a man if you just let him sip it. But if you try to force the whole bottle down his throat at one time, he'll throw it up."[14] To Douglass, the enfranchisement of Black men took precedence over that of women. He would later argue in an address to the American Equal Rights Association:

> I must say that I do not see how anyone can pretend that there is the same urgency in giving the ballot to women as to the negro. With us, the matter is a question of life and death. It is a matter of existence, at least, in fifteen states of the Union. When women, because they are women, are hunted down through the cities of New York and New Orleans; when they are dragged from their houses and hung upon lamp-posts; when their children are torn from their arms, and their brains dashed out upon the pavement; when they are objects of insult and outrage at every turn; when they are in danger of having their homes burnt down over their heads; when their children are not allowed to enter schools; then they will have an urgency to obtain the ballot equal to our own.[15]

While delivering that speech, a member of the audience exclaimed, "Is that not all true about Black women?" Douglass, in response, argued, "Yes, yes, yes, it is true of the black woman, but not because she is a woman but because she is black."[16] The threat posed by White supremacist violence in the nation had to be addressed before anything else. Douglass still supported suffrage for women; he just was not willing to push for universal suffrage at that time. He later reminded the audience in the same speech, "I am in favor of woman's suffrage in order that we shall have all the virtue and all the vice confronted."[17] His pragmatic politics were not unfamiliar for the era—Thaddeus Stevens, a proud defender of equal rights for all races, was forced to deny his belief in equality to avoid alienating moderates from supporting the

13th Amendment. Stevens, like Douglass, made a seemingly rational choice to sacrifice their morals for the sake of political gain.

Douglass' decision prompted fierce criticism from suffragists. He was not responsible for the term 'male citizen' found in the 14th Amendment, but, to many suffragists, he was responsible for casting aside women's suffrage to ensure Black suffrage. Susan B. Anthony, a social reformer and prominent suffragist, at the same Equal Rights Association meeting, responded to Douglass's arguments:

> Mr. Douglass talks about the wrongs of the negro; how he is hunted down, and the children's brains dashed out by mobs; but with all the wrongs and outrages that he today suffers, he would not exchange his sex and take the place of Elizabeth Cady Stanton.[18]

Anthony disagreed with Douglass's prioritization of voting rights for Black men. Douglass joked in response, "I want to know if granting you the right of suffrage will change the nature of our sexes."[19] Elizabeth Cady Stanton similarly opposed prioritizing the enfranchisement of Black men over women, or White women really. She wrote in editorials, "All wise women should oppose the Fifteenth Amendment for two reasons: 1st, Because it is invidious to sex. … 2nd, We should oppose the measure because men have no right to pass it without our consent."[20] To both of these suffragists and many other White women, Douglass had crossed a line in casting aside the goals of women's suffrage.

III. Catt, Willard, and Racial Discourse in Suffrage Advocacy

a. Catt's Complex Commitment to Equal Rights

Similarly to Frederick Douglass, Carrie Chapman Catt, a White suffragist who played an integral role in the movement in both the 19th and 20th Centuries, faced difficult challenges when addressing the intersectionality of race and gender. Catt's commitment to equality was complicated by her pragmatism, as evidenced by her 1902 President's Annual Address for the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Catt acknowledged the importance of defeating the social prejudices and biases that denied suffrage to women and restricted suffrage to Black men. Still, she recognized campaigns based solely on rightness and justice did not win elections. She explained:

> My sisters, we might as well face the problem fairly and squarely. We are not to fight in the future against the prejudices of society. We are not disfranchised because women do not want to vote; because of the dreadful things threatened in the past, but we are disfranchised because the political machines of this country are afraid of a woman's vote. … the time has now come for us to lay aside our claim of right and justice … [21]

Her pragmatic stance here foreshadows her willingness to compromise on the principles of equal rights, particularly concerning racial issues.

Catt seemed to remain committed to the ideals of racial equality. In a 1917 article on the patriarchal nature of World War I published in *The Crisis*, a periodical for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, she wrote, "There will never be a true democracy until every responsible and law-abiding adult in it, without regard to race, sex, color or creed has his or her own inalienable and unpurchasable voice in the government."[22] Catt also mentioned in the article suffragists' frustration with Douglass's decision to drop women's suffrage:

> Once long ago, the Negro man made the white man's mistake of deciding that the suffrage was the prerogative of men only. That was just after the Civil War. He had his chance then to stand by the woman's rights cause that stood by him. He did not do it. Like the white men around him, he could not and would not recognize that women were people, and that women, as well as men, must have a voice in their own government. Like the white man, he wanted democracy applied for himself, but not for woman. That is the crucial error of all men, white or black, in their efforts to apply democracy.[23]

Catt, like many other suffragists, still resented the compromise of the 15th Amendment. Her statement on racial equality in the article contradicts her later statements during the campaign for the suffrage amendment.

In the fight for the 19th Amendment, Catt was frequently faced with accusations of her support for equal rights for Black citizens. 'Antis,' or anti-suffragists, spread rumors in the lead-up to the Nashville vote on the 19th Amendment about Catt supporting interracial marriage. Such gossip presented a brewing scandal and loss of support for Catt and the broader suffrage movement. A Gallup poll conducted in 1958, nearly forty years later, found that less than one percent of Whites in the South supported interracial marriage. The same poll found that even outside the South, less than five percent of Whites approved of marriages between Black and White people specifically.[24] Catt firmly denied such claims, stating, "It is an absolute fabrication that I have at any time advocated inter-marriage between the white and negro races."

She went on to call it a "crime against nature."[25] In South Carolina, she refuted rumors that she'd "been entertaining in negro homes and entertaining negroes in [her] home."[26] To Catt, denying these accusations represented her laying aside her claims to "right and justice."

Her fascination with evolutionary biology further complicated her commitment to equality. As Kevin Amidon explains, "In her view, white women always participated in evolutionary progress, but people of color might or might not."[27] Amidon argues that Catt's advocacy was built around her interest in the evolutionary development of human diversity. She had a particular interest in the most academically distinguished and publicly recognized American thinkers about biology, evolution, and eugenics.[28] Catt even once defined *feminism* as "an evolution, like enlightenment and democracy …"[29] Catt had no fear supporting exclusionary racial positions, as they didn't contradict her belief in human nature and evolutionary biology.

b. Francis Willard's Feuds

Another suffragist of a similar era to Catt, Francis Willard, the longest-serving president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), played a pivotal role in the movement but found herself entangled in bitter disputes over racial issues, particularly with Ida B. Wells. The conflict centered primarily around the issues of lynching and suffrage. Wells, a Black activist and journalist, viewed the protection of Black people from lynchings and sexual violence as her top priority, while White women's rights activists, led by Willard, focused on suffrage. Willard, like many other women, was still upset over the compromise of the 15th Amendment and strongly believed women had been robbed of their opportunity to be enfranchised.[30]

As president of the WCTU, Willard saw great promise in linking the temperance movement to the suffrage movement. She similarly deemed it necessary to get White, Southern women on board with both movements, if they planned on going anywhere. To achieve support in the South, Willard catered to White, Southern racists and segregated chapters of the WCTU, along with other racially exclusionary policies. Willard's actions alienated many Black women from the WCTU and the suffrage movement, one

of whom was Ida B. Wells. Wells was the most outspoken critic of Willard and saw her narrow-mindedness as counterproductive for demanding reform. Both groups, Black women and White women, had an interest in temperance—a means to reduce overspending and domestic abuse by their husbands. Wills and Willard's feud was long-lasting and particularly vicious, with Wells going so far as to accuse Willard of supporting lynchings. Willard fervently denied such claims.[31] As Anita August writes, "... the philosophy of sisterhood in the WCTU could not overcome the social hierarchy of the nineteenth century, which created different oppressive states for Black and white women."[32]

c. Voices from the South: Suffragists and the "Negro Problem"

Catt and Willard were not alone in succumbing to prevailing racist attitudes, whether out of pragmatism or personal belief. The initial push in the South for women's suffrage was based almost entirely on solving the "Negro Problem."[33] Suffragists saw an opening through which they could appeal to racist lawmakers to support enfranchising women. Stanton and Anthony, notably, argued that White women's enfranchisement would be an "electoral bulwark" against Black voters.[34] Because of Black Codes restricting the voting of Black people in the South, a sizeable voter base of White women was seen as an opportunity to further limit the political influence of Black people.[35] As Marjorie Julian Spruill notes, "The accommodation of white suffragists to the racist politics of the turn-of-the-century South is one of the best-known and most frequently debated aspects of the southern suffrage movement."[36]

This "southern strategy," as suffragists called it, saw very little success. The only victory Southern suffragists achieved was the 1889 Louisiana decision allowing taxpaying women the right to vote on issues relating to taxes only.[37] Louisiana's reform marked little progress for the movement. Kentucky had already granted voting rights to female heads of households over taxes and schools in 1838, more than fifty years before Louisiana. Plenty of other states across the country had adopted 'partial suffrage' laws like Kentucky. By 1903, suffragists recognized that their strategy was failing. Spruill explains, "White conservative men preferred to restore white supremacy through the disenfranchisement of black men without enfranchising *any* women."[38] Suffragists hoped that Southern lawmakers might

compromise on their sexist views to preserve White supremacy. Unlike suffragists, the lawmakers saw little to gain from political pragmatism and preferred to stick by their exclusionary, bigoted values.

Following the failed "southern strategy," a majority of the suffragists moved on from the South, recognizing that winning voting rights there would be next to impossible. Harriett Taylor Upton, a treasurer of NAWSA, stated in 1906, "I have often thought that the southern women might be enfranchised before the northern women because of the solution of the colored question, but we meet indifference of southerners at every turn."[39] NAWSA, following the failed campaign, began to publicly condemn the Southern suffragists who continued to rely on racist arguments for enfranchising women. Although 'second-generation' suffragists were not always more progressive than prevailing attitudes to race, they "recognized they had little to gain and a lot to lose by playing the race card."[40] Their decision to leave behind the "southern strategy" reflects their focus on political pragmatism; the suffragists were willing to achieve the 19th Amendment by any means necessary.

IV. Comparative Analysis

a. Parallels and Divergences Between Douglass and Suffragists

Frederick Douglass's compromises with the suffragists and the suffragists' compromises themselves provide an interesting historical controversy ripe for analysis. As explained above, both compromises were driven by pragmatic politics. Douglass recognized that the post-war period represented the optimal time for enfranchising Black men and prioritized this over pushing for universal suffrage. Similarly, suffragists like Carrie Chapman Catt were willing to compromise on principles of equal rights in order to win bipartisan support and gain suffrage for women. In both cases, the compromises were motivated by a desire to make progress within the existing political terrain.

Political expediency played a large role in the decision-making of both Douglass and the suffragists. Douglass frequently discussed the importance and urgency of suffrage for Black men as an electoral check on the continued violence against Black people. Suffragists similarly alluded to the importance of expediency, despite the fact it took decades for the movement to see suffrage legislation

make it out of Congress. After the 15th Amendment, Congress saw bills relating to women's suffrage in nearly every session up until the 19th Amendment's ratification, yet, despite the urgency of suffragists, an amendment wasn't ratified until 1920. Only two of the women who attended the Seneca Falls Convention even lived long enough to see women secure voting rights.

A glaring difference between Douglass's compromises and those of the suffragists lies in the extent to which they compromised. Douglass never denied the claim that women deserved the right to vote—he supported the women's rights movement and actively canvassed for the right to vote explicitly. Douglass, however, saw it as a matter of political priorities. Women might deserve enfranchisement, but Black men deserved it more urgently. Douglass, immediately after securing the 15th Amendment, demanded an amendment securing women the right to vote.[41]

Few suffragists turned around after the 19th Amendment in support of the protection of voting rights for Black women recently enfranchised in the South. As Marjorie Spruill notes, "after the 19th amendment was ratified in 1920, so few southern white suffragists came out in support of southern black women, when southern states denied them the vote in the 1920s."[42] Suffragist's arguments, in addition, often devolved into overtly racist discourse that denied the claim Black people deserved certain political rights. These instances of racial discrimination within the suffrage movement highlight the complexities and contradictions in the pursuit of equality and necessitate the study of the drivers behind such compromises.

Considering the broader social and legislative challenges faced by both Douglass and the suffragists remains essential to analyzing their pragmatism. As Marjorie Spruill writes, "the southern suffragists … must be examined in the context of these national and regional developments, recognizing that the context—and thus the role of the race issue in the woman suffrage movement—changed over time."[43] Considered the 'nadir' of race relations, the early 20th century represented a difficult challenge to political rights activists of all stripes. Most suffragists, especially in the South, were only considered 'radical' because of their insistence on women's suffrage. Very few of these women disagreed with opinions of the White South on racial issues. Resistance to both racial and gender equality in this era was

formidable, and understanding the political environment under which these reformers operated provides a useful analytical tool for assessing their motives.

b. Public Perception and Legacy

Analyzing how historians and the public have treated the compromises of Douglass and the suffragists sheds light on the differences between their compromises. Catt, in particular, has faced severe backlash for her approach to racial issues. At her alma mater, Iowa State University, an attempted naming of a building in 1995 after Catt generated fierce backlash from members of the student body. The controversy began when a group of students published an article in *Uhuru!*, a publication organized by the Black Student Union at Iowa State. The article levied a fierce criticism of Catt's complicated past:

> Catt assured whites in states such as Mississippi and South Carolina that methods that have been used to disenfranchise black men (such as literacy tests and poll tax) would be applied to black women as well. Catt can also be seen as a racist because of her decision to exclude black women from public parades and gatherings and even 'supported congressional provisions which would have barred black women from suffrage'. Not only did Catt oppose the blacks in general obtaining the vote, but she implied that she would support those lawful and unlawful tactics to disenfranchise black women. This brings into play an interesting argument about the suffragist movement. For whom were they fighting anyhow? If one says all women, then how could a feminist leader advocate the disenfranchisement of another woman, regardless of her race?[44]

To the Black Student Union and the authors of this petition, naming the building after Catt represented a blatant disregard for Catt's white supremacy and the broader suffrage movement's racism. The article also criticized other suffragists including Elizabeth Cady Stanton, arguing they had just as troubled a past as Catt. The student's article set off an entire movement, the September 29th Movement, named after the day the article was published. The movement's website listed their justification for the protest:

> The September 29th Movement is dedicated to the elimination of racism, xenophobia, sexism, homophobia, and classism at Iowa State University, recognizing that changing the name of Catt Hall, a symbol of exclusion, must be the first step in the struggle.[45]

Much of the Black Student Union's article in *Uhuru!* was based on Barbara Andolsen's "*Daughters of Jefferson, Daughters of Bootblacks": Racism and American Feminism*. Andolsen, however, did not agree with the claims of the movement that Catt or Stanton ought to be judged based on a few of their flaws. She argues:

> Nonetheless, Stanton, Shaw, and Catt were also women of integrity who had a genuine commitment to the struggle for the recognition of the rights of all women. In my judgment, these women did not passively condone Southern segregation practices and actively manipulate racist ideology solely, or even primarily, because of personal bad intentions. These white women suffrage leaders made their strategic choices to use racist ideology to their own advantage within the context of a racist society that put intense political pressure upon them. In a racist society these women had severely limited choices. They did, however, have the option of actively resisting racism, although at the likely cost of a significant delay in obtaining woman suffrage.[46]

Andolsen's argument falls in line with many other historians, who view Catt's lapses of morals as nothing more than pragmatic politics. As Amidon explains, "A successful adjudication of the qualities of Catt's approach to race requires an adequate understanding of the most significant grounds on which she developed her inclusionary and exclusionary arguments and applied them throughout her career."[47] Criticism of Catt has not been isolated to Iowa State, as many scholars have criticized Catt, Stanton, and other suffragists for their purported white supremacist beliefs.

Frederick Douglass, in contrast, has not received anywhere near the same level of criticism for his setting aside of women's rights goals. Aside from the initial backlash from suffragists like Stanton, Douglass has been celebrated for his advocacy for women's suffrage and has been referred to as a "Woman's Rights Man."[48] His efforts to promote the rights of all marginalized people have cemented his place as a revered figure in American history.

The differing treatment of these historical figures highlights the complexities of intersectional activism and the struggle to reconcile ideals of equality with realities of systemic sexism and racism. While there were certainly differences between each case of pragmatic politics, the reception of these activists raises important questions about potential biases against female reformers throughout American history.

V. Case Study: Tennessee's Role in Suffrage

The suffragists' campaign in Nashville provides a particularly poignant example of the importance of context in analyzing racist discourse in advocacy. The last possible state to ratify the 19th Amendment, Tennessee witnessed swarms of suffragists and Antis converging on the state's capitol in

Nashville. With the recent rejection of the amendment by Florida's governor and the likelihood of North Carolina's wholesale rejection, suffragists put all their faith, even if in small quantities, in Tennessee's ratification. The suffragists understood the stakes. Failure in Tennessee would not only deal a devastating blow to the movement but also signal a troubling regression in the broader political landscape. Against this backdrop, ratification in Tennessee became a necessity—or else women feared they would have to wait another fifty years before having another shot at suffrage.

Before she arrived in Nashville, Catt penned a letter to a Tennessee suffrage leader stating they needed to present an "absolute, unified, optimistic front turned toward the enemy." She foresaw the deluge of incendiary literature the Antis would deploy, noting how it would contain "outright lies, innuendos, and near truths, which are more damaging than lies." In particular, she noted the topic of racial equality would be brought up. She wrote, "It will be extremely harmful, and the 'nigger question' will be put forth in the ways to arouse the greatest possible prejudice."[49] Catt was aware of the challenge ahead of her—and she had been waiting for this opportunity for decades. She is rumored to have said just a few days before she left for Nashville, "At this time, I do not believe there is a ghost of a chance of ratification in Tennessee."[50] The deeply sexist and racist legislature showed little to no sign of yielding to the demands of the women's suffrage movement.

John Jay Vertrees, a leader in the Tennessee State Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage (TSAOWS), delivered a fervent address to the Tennessee State Legislature outlining his staunch opposition to suffrage:

> Babes, felons, lunatics, and aliens within the state, all are human beings. Therefore, they are all entitled to vote the same as grown, rational men. The very statement of the proposition is its own refutation. Even the States in which woman suffrage exists rejects this doctrine. They all have classes of human beings to whom suffrage is denied. This notion that the individual instead of the family, is the social unit, has also been seized upon by those who believe in social and racial equality.[51]

Vertrees appealed to the White supremacism rampant in the Tennessee General Assembly, equating the women's suffrage movement with calls for full racial equality. He wasn't alone in his campaign against the amendment—his wife, Virginia Vertrees, who served as president of the TSAOWS, and Josephine

Pearson, another renowned Anti, joined him in mounting a formidable campaign against ratification. Their efforts were bolstered by corporate heavyweights in the railroad and liquor industries, both of whom were clients of Vertrees. The liquor industry's opposition to women's suffrage came as no surprise, as many women advocating for women's suffrage also supported prohibition. The railroad industry, however, opposed the amendment out of pure fear they would lose their massive influence over the Tennessee legislature. A shake-up in the voter base, they calculated, may require them to invest in new legislators on the political scene.[52] The success of the amendment required preparedness to the "last buckle on the last strap."[53] Catt and her comrades recognized the forces standing in their way and the importance of carefully weighing every word they uttered.

While the bill was eventually ratified, it passed by a margin of one legislator's vote—Harry Burn. Burn, at just 24 years old, cast the deciding ballot in the enfranchisement of all women across the entire United States. He did so wearing a Red Rose, the symbol of the Antis. Burn had been pegged as a "Nay" vote by both sides because of his impending re-election campaign and his constituents' overwhelming opposition to the idea. No one expected Bun to vote "Aye" that day. Little did the nation know Burn had received a letter from his mother, Febb Burn, urging him to vote in favor of suffrage.[54] Febb wrote:

> Dear Son, . . . Hurray and vote for Suffrage and don't keep them in doubt. I noticed Chandlers' speech, it was very bitter. I've been waiting to see how you stood but have not seen anything yet. . . . Don't forget to be a good boy, and help Mrs. "Thomas Catt" with her "Rats." Is she the one that put rat in ratification, Ha! No more from mama this time. With lots of love, Mama.[55]

Febb's letter to Harry mirrors Abigail Adams's letter to John Adams at the Continental Congress. Perhaps if Adams had truly remembered the ladies, Febb would not have had to send her letter in the first place. The story of Harry Burn serves as a reminder that there was truly no margin for error on the part of the suffragists in Nashville. Their relentless advocacy, while flawed in many ways, paved the way for progress and reshaped the course of American history.

VI. Conclusion

The flaws and racism present throughout the suffrage movement cannot be understated. Plenty of suffragists relied on such discourse out of pure apathy for the rights of Black Americans. Those instances, however, do not negate the existence of suffragists who harbored progressive stances on racial issues and had to publicly compromise on those personal beliefs. While it's crucial to acknowledge the pervasive immorality and racism within the movement, it is equally important to recognize the nuanced decisions of activists who supported progressive ideals despite the prevailing societal prejudices of their time.

One notable topic on the intersectionality of race and gender largely missing from the preceding discussion is the experience of Black women in the suffrage movement. For activists like Sojourner Truth, Mary Church Terrell, and Ida B. Wells, advocating for both women's rights and racial equality was inseparable. These women faced the dual challenge of combating gender discrimination in pushing for women's suffrage while also contending with systemic racism in broader society and in the suffrage movement itself.

The suffrage movement was not monolithic but made up of diverse groups with differing ideologies and approaches. While some suffragists adopted racist rhetoric or excluded Black women from their advocacy, others actively sought to include and uplift them. In Tennessee, for instance, Black female leaders in Nashville like Dr. Mattie E. Coleman, a practicing physician, and J. Frankie Pierce, a community organizer and founder of women's clubs in Nashville, worked alongside white suffrage leaders like Katherine Kenny, a leader of the Tennessee League of Women Voters, while championing the rights of Black women.[56] As Goodstein notes:

> Black women joined the suffrage ranks because they were convinced of the necessity of voting in order to protect their interests and because they saw suffrage as part of a larger strategy of racial progress. White suffragists entered this alliance because they believed wholeheartedly in suffrage as a righteous cause and because they, too, were pragmatists with a political agenda.[57]

The alliance was a notable exception to the predominant experiences of Black suffragists in the South, that being overwhelming hostility and exclusion.[58]

Understanding the complexities of the suffrage movement requires grappling with the contradictions and compromises made by its participants. While acknowledging the moral failings and racism that tarnished the reputation of the suffragists, it is essential to celebrate the achievements of those who fought for equality and recognize the ongoing relevance of their struggles in modern debates on the intersectionality of race and gender.

Notes

[1] Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March 1776, Adams Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Cambridge, Mass, accessed April 29, 2024, https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17760331aa.

[2] Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “Address: First Women's Rights Convention," 19 July 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton Unpublished Manuscript Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

[3] Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “On the Women’s Rights Convention," 19-20 July 1848, Elizabeth Cady Stanton Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Judith Wellman, “Declaring Woman’s Rights, July 1848,” in *The Road to Seneca Falls: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the First Woman’s Rights Convention* (University of Illinois Press, 2011), 19.

[6] Carol Faulkner, *Lucretia Mott's Heresy: Abolition and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-century America* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 180.

[7] Elaine Weiss, *The Woman's Hour: The Great Fight to Win the Vote* (Viking, 2018), 51.

[8] Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass: His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History: an Autobiography* (New York: Avenel, N.J.: Gramercy Books; Distributed by Outlet Book Co., 1993)

[9] Weiss, *The Woman's Hour*, 51.

[10] Frederick Douglass, “The Rights of Women,” *The North Star*, July 28, 1848, Frederick Douglass Newspapers Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

[11] Weiss, *The Woman's Hour*, 51.

[12] S. Jay Walker, “Frederick Douglass and Woman Suffrage,” *The Black Scholar* 4, no. 6/7 (1973): 26, https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.1973.11760855

[13] Weiss, *The Woman's Hour*, 133.

[14] Andrew Rudalevige, “Congress Is a Whiskey Drinker: Centralization and Legislative Success,” In *Managing the President’s Program: Presidential Leadership and Legislative Policy Formulation*, 113. Princeton University Press, 2002, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691190266-008

[15] George Barr, Eamonn Brandon, Kate Burzlaff, Mark Furnish, Kathryn Jacks, Rebecca Pattillo, Alex Smith, and Lynette Taylor, “‘We Welcome the Fifteenth Amendment’ (1869).” In *The Speeches of Frederick Douglass: A Critical Edition*, edited by John R. McKivigan, Julie Husband, and Heather L. Kaufman, 271, Yale University Press, 2018, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv6hp3kt.16

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., 272

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., 273

[20] Walker, “Frederick Douglass and Woman Suffrage,” 30

[21] Carrie Chapman Catt, “Presidential Address to NAWSA - March 19, 1903,” Archives of Women’s Political Communication, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, accessed February 19, 2024, https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2018/08/27/1903-nawsa-presidential-address/.

[22] Carrie Chapman Catt, “Voters for All - Nov. 1917,” *The Crisis*, November 1, 1917, Archives of Women’s Political Communication, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, accessed February 19, 2024, https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2018/03/21/votes-for-all-nov-1917/.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Renee C. Romano, “The Dangers of ‘Race Mixing’,’” In *Race Mixing: Black-White Marriage in Postwar America*, 45, Harvard University Press, 2003, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1kz4grj.6.

[25] Weiss, *The Woman's Hour*, 266.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Kevin S. Amidon, “Carrie Chapman Catt and the Evolutionary Politics of Sex and Race, 1885-1940,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 68, no. 2 (2007): 328, http://www.jstor.org/stable/30136020.

[28] Ibid., 305-306.

[29] Ibid., 309.

[30] Anita August, “Strained Sisterhood in the WCTU: The Lynching and Suffrage Rivalry between Ida B. Wells and Frances E. Willard,” *Rhetoric Review* 40, no. 1 (2021): 1-2, https://doi.org/10.1080/07350198.2020.1841451.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Marjorie Julian Spruill, "Race, Reform, And Reaction At The Turn Of The Century: Southern Suffragists, the NAWSA, and the 'Southern Strategy' in Context," in *Votes For Women: The Struggle for Suffrage Revisited*, edited by Jean H Baker, 106, Oxford University Press, 2002.

[34] Weiss, *The Woman's Hour*, 135.

[35] Spruill, “Race, Reform, And Reaction,” 105

[36] Ibid., 102

[37] Ibid., 107

[38] Ibid., 108

[39] Ibid., 109

[40] Ibid., 111

[41] Walker, “Frederick Douglass and Woman Suffrage,” 30

[42] Spruill, “Race, Reform, And Reaction,” 113

[43] Ibid., 103

[44] *Uhuru!*, “October 1995,” University Library Digital Collections, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, accessed February 20, 2024, https://digitalcollections.lib.iastate.edu/islandora/object/isu%3ASeptember29th_160.

[45] “Printed Version of the Website of the September 29th Movement, 1998-11-23,” University Library Digital Collections, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, accessed February 20, 2024, https://digitalcollections.lib.iastate.edu/islandora/object/isu%3ASeptember29th_160.

[46] Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, *Daughters of Jefferson, Daughters of Bootblacks: Racism and American Feminism* (Mercer University Press, Macon, Georgia, 1986), 79.

[47] Amidon, “Carrie Chapman Catt and the Evolutionary Politics of Sex and Race,” 309

[48] Weiss, *The Woman's Hour*, 50.

[49] Ibid., 20-21.

[50] Ibid., 21.

[51] John J. Vertrees, “An Address to the Men of Tennessee on Female Suffrage, 1916.” Woman’s Suffrage in Tennessee, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville, TN, accessed January 26, 2024, https://teva.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15138coll27/id/952.

[52] Weiss, *The Woman's Hour*, 38-40.

[53] Marjorie Julian Spruill, *Votes for Women!: The Woman Suffrage Movement in Tennessee, the South, and the Nation* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 253.

[54] Weiss, *The Woman's Hour*, 305-306.

[55] Febb Burn, “Letter to Harry Burn from Mother, August 1920." Calvin M. McClung Historical Collection,” Calvin M. McClung Historical Collection, Knox County Public Library, Knoxville, Tenn., accessed May 8, 2024, https://cmdc.knoxlib.org/digital/collection/p265301coll8/id/691.

[56] Anita Shafer Goodstein, “A Rare Alliance: African American and White Women in the Tennessee Elections of 1919 and 1920,” *The Journal of Southern History* 64, no. 2 (1998): 229, https://doi.org/10.2307/2587945.

[57] Ibid., 220.

[58] Ibid., 219.

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